

West Parish Congregational Church  
(West Parish Meeting House)  
State Route 149  
Barnstable  
Barnstable County  
Massachusetts

HABS No. MA-779

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D. C. 20240

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

WEST PARISH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH  
(West Parish Meeting House)

HABS No. MA-779

Location: State Route 149, Barnstable,  
Barnstable County, Massachusetts.

Present Owner: First Parish Congregational Church.

Present Use: Place of worship.

Significance: Structurally, this meeting house, built in 1717, subsequently enlarged, remodelled in 1852 and restored in 1953, resembles the noted Old Ship Church in Hingham, Massachusetts. The Barnstable building houses the oldest organization, gathered in England in 1616, of the Congregational Church in America.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

The following anonymous "brief history of the West Parish Church and Meetinghouse" was available at the church in mimeographed form in 1959.

In the year 1616 a small group of men and women gathered in the Borough of Southwark, . . . just across London Bridge from the City of London. "Joining hands, they solemnly covenanted with one another in the presence of almighty God to walk together in all his ways and ordinances according as he had revealed them in his word, or should further make them known." . . .

The Southwark Church was not the first Independent or Separatist Church to be gathered in England. It was, however, the first Independent (Congregational) Church that was to survive to the present time. . . . Most of the early Independents fled to Holland after they had braved persecution and imprisonment . . . in England.

The little Church chose Henry Jacob their first pastor. He had been a priest in the Church of England, was a graduate of Oxford University, and in 1616 had just returned from six or seven years with the Church of Leyden, Holland, that was to send a group of its people to the New World in 1620. Under the leadership of Henry Jacob the Church in Southwark continued . . . It was Henry Jacob who first used the term "Congregational: to describe a Church of the faith and order that has come down to us with that name.

In 1622 Henry Jacob, now sixty years old, left the Church in Southwark to move to Virginia. His will was probated in 1624, and the inventory of his estate was filed in the Court of the Jamestown Colony in 1627.

He was succeeded in Southwark Church in 1624 by the Rev. John Lothrop, a graduate of Cambridge University, who had also been ordained to the priesthood in the Church of England. . . . In the Spring of 1632 . . . John Lothrop and forty-two of his congregation were imprisoned in the Clink. . . . In the course of the next two years most . . . were released, until in 1634 only the Reverend Mr. Lothrop remained in prison. . .

In 1634 Mr. Lothrop petitioned the king for permission to leave the country, and on release from prison sailed for New England on the ship "Griffin" with some . . . members of the Church. They settled in Scituate where others of the Southwark Church had preceeded them.

Five years later minister and people moved . . . to Cape Cod where they were attracted by the rough hay of the salt marshes and by lands the Indians had cleared. This migration in 1639 marked the founding of the Town of Barnstable. The Church. . . had continued a worshipping community through more than twenty years of persecution and hardship. . . Mr. Lothrop and those who came with him brought with them the sacramental vessels of the Church; a handsome pewter tankard, pewter plates, and a simple baptismal vessel. It is believed that these vessels were used . . . before 1632, . . . These vessels are in the possession of the West Parish Church, and the baptismal vessel is used . . . as it has been for more than three centuries.

In the years that followed the migration to Barnstable the settlement grew. Attendance at Church became more and more difficult for those living on farms at the extreme east and west ends of the Parish, and in 1712 agitation began in Town Meeting for the town to be divided into two Parishes with a Meetinghouse in the east and another in the west.

Work began on the Meetinghouse in the West Parish in 1717. Great timbers of pine and oak were cut from the hillsides near the site chosen for the building. Beams and posts were sawed and trimmed over a saw pit dug near the Meetinghouse, then carefully chamfered or beaded by skillful craftsmen of the village working with simple tools. The oaken beams that were to support the roof of the new Meetinghouse were hung with weights at either end for a year to bend them in a graceful arc. The high pulpit and sounding board, the galleries and panels and pews were fashioned by village craftsmen who were building the largest and grandest structure in the village, and built it to stand for many generations.

The Reverend Jonathan Russell, who succeeded his father, Jonathan Russell, to the ministry of the Church in 1712, was given choice whether he would serve the East or West Parish. He chose to serve the West Parish, and carried with him the old records of the Church, the ancient pewter, and the handsome early American silver which the Church had acquired in Barnstable. The West Parish Meetinghouse was not finished until 1719 and the first service held on Thanksgiving Day of that year.

A few years later (tradition gives the date as 1732) the new Meetinghouse was already too small. Accordingly, the building was cut in half, the ends pulled apart and two bays added in the middle lengthening the structure about eighteen feet. It was at that time that a ceiling was built covering the handsome beams left exposed by the first builders, and a bell tower erected at the east end of the building. The cock that has crowned the tower since that time was brought from England in 1723. It was not until 1806 that the Parish secured a large bell to swing in the open belfry, but in that year a bequest in the will of Colonel James Otis made it possible for the Parish to commission Mr. Paul Revere and Son to cast a fine bell of about half a ton weight.

Other changes were made in the building through the years. Major repairs were made necessary by the story of Town Meetings that were held in the Meetinghouse particularly during the Revolution and the War of 1812. Much work was done in 1834 when the high pulpit was moved to the west end of the building and necessary changes made in the galleries. But in 1852 the Meetinghouse was again in a bad state of repair. There was discussion of tearing it down and building new, but the Parish was poor, and there was such feeling for the "old house" that it was decided to preserve the structure, but to remodel and "modernize" it. Accordingly the old bell tower was torn down and a new belfry and spire erected on the roof to carry the Revere bell and the old cock. The galleries and box pews and high pulpit were removed, and new plastered ceiling and walls fashioned to hide all of the old beams. From 1852 until 1953 the Meetinghouse stood as a new-classic building characteristic of the mid-teenth century.

The restoration of the Meetinghouse began in 1953 under the direction of the architect, Mr. Edwin B. Goodell, Jr. The work was finished by early 1958 with the exception of the great organ which was completed the following year. The prudence of the 1852 remodellers was of great help in making the restoration authentic, for when tower and galleries were removed in the remodeling the old beams were used in the new work. These original members have been used in their rightful places in the restoration or have been duplicated. Panelling, windowframes, and other parts of the old Meetinghouse were sold at auction in 1852, and were built into houses now standing in the village. One of the original window frames has been restored to its place in the Meetinghouse and the others have been patterned from it. The new gallery panelling is a copy of the original gallery panel which is now a part of another house in the village.

The centuries have made full circle to let the Meetinghouse stand again as it stood more than two hundred and forty years ago. Much that was real and central in the life of the Church and Parish two hundred years ago remains today. The Church that has worshipped continuously in the old building since Thanksgiving Day 1719 continues to worship there in the faith of the fathers. The West Parish Meetinghouse is not a museum. It is a memorial to the devotion of the fathers who built it, a testimony to the faithfulness of those who maintained it through the centuries, and a witness to the life of the active Church that worships in it today.